

AN OLD TIME POSTAL DISTRIBUTION IN ILLINOIS

Portages, waterways, and Indian thoroughfares have given a valuable key to pioneer history.

The portage furnished an elevation for the path of the constantly shifting tribes, as well as a water shed and continental land mark; and the river, a means of transportation and a pass beyond the hills and ranges; the Indian trails connected sections of the country with strategic advantages, and a return from the river journey when the swift flowing stream gave too much resistance to the ascending canoe:---

Some such determining causes mark the history of settlement, and lines furnishing the least resistance were soon traced between the outposts of civilization, and places of older habitation ---

Advantages of location were as apparent in pioneer days as in later periods of peace and plenty, power, transportation, easy access to promising markets, and wealth of natural store, marked centers of population which were finally connected by roads first faintly traced by the feet of courageous explorers, with an instinct for pathfinding, and later deeply worn and established by increasing traffic.

Over these trails, with a definite direction of settlement the mail carrier, that faithful servant of the growing state, would early find his way; as for instance, the Government built a fort on the site of Chicago, in 1804 and in 1805 the first mail route entered the state.

It is not the purpose of this paper to trace the development of postal routes in the State, but to give an example of mail distribution in an early day, which was probably the general plan throughout the State, and in tracing these lines of service incidentally reveal examples of fidelity to official duty too little appreciated in the history of the development of our state:---

In the early thirties, W. K. Brown settled on Mud Creek in what is now Esmond Township, Livingston County, Illinois, where he was for a time engaged in farming but in 1848 he removed to Ottawa and took charge of several mail routes out of that place. G. W. Rice, from the above named County, was at that time a boy in his early "teens" and was employed to carry mail--one line ran between Ottawa and Doty's stand, ten miles directly west of Chicago on the plank road, on the bank of the DesPlaines River. Another ran between Ottawa and Naperville, in DuPage County. The carrier leaving Ottawa would follow the Fox River to a road passing through Neward, and then Yorkville, Oswego and Naperville. Mr Rice, now living in Pontiac, carried mail over this route the winter of 1849--50, and attended school in Ottawa in connection with his work, starting on Saturday and returning so that only Monday was lost from his regular school attendance.

A third line under the supervision of Mr. Brown ran from Peru, Barron Grove, and Cambridge, and on to Millidgeville, with intermediate offices between the towns mentioned.

The Ottawa-Peoria route, ran through Lowell and Mount Palatine to an office kept by Allen Gray near Crow Creek on the old Chicago road through Woodford County; the next stop being Metamora, at that time County seat, and then by Washington to Peoria.

The trip began at Ottawa Monday morning and ended in Peoria Tuesday night, on Wednesday a short trip was made from Peoria to Washington and back again, spending that night in Peoria, and the next morning the through return trip was begun.

On the route to Bloomington, the carrier left Ottawa on Friday morning, ferried the river, and turned west crossing Covel Creek down the river. A man by the name of Richardson kept the office here, and the next office was at the home of Elmer Baldwin, an honored citizen of LaSalle County, and author of a very excellent history of the county. Norton Mackey on Otter Creek kept the next office, and the one following was kept by Isaac Painter on Prairie Creek on land now covered by the eastern section of the City of Streator, dinner was taken here, and the first stop in the afternoon was made at New Michigan, the office being kept by Mr. Richards, and this was followed by the office in Sunberry Township on Mud Creek, the office being kept at different times by W. K. Brown, John Bradley and E. G. Rice. The route resumed Saturday morning brought mail to Pontiac to the office in the store of Willett Gray and Samuel Ladd.

Four miles southeast and along the river and the office of Daniel Rockwoods was reached, and dinner secured. The next stop being at Avoca in the McDowell settlement. The office was kept by Wilson on the little Vermillion, but the stream having to be crossed, and often swollen by floods, the office was changed to McDowells, though retaining the former name.

The next stop was at Indian Grove where the night was spent. John Darnell cared for the mail, and in the morning the carrier faced in the direction of Lexington, a stretch of fifteen miles without a sign of habitation. This office kept by Flesher, was reached at noon, and services being concluded in a near by church the people tarried for the mail. The next office was on Money Creek, and Bloomington being reached Sunday

evening, and the return trip begun Monday morning, arriving at Ottawa Tuesday night.

Mr. Rice rode all these routes at different times under the direction of Mr. Brown the contractor; the journey was made on horse-back, and the schedule so planned as to require brisk movement along the journey--this was ⁹⁰ 66* years ago, and the condition of the undeveloped roads at that time, and especially in the winter and spring time, gave the carrier a responsibility not to be coveted, and especially when it is remembered that the carrier only received \$8.00 per month as a salary. Mr. Rice tells of crossing the Illinois River at Ottawa, when the forming ice was too dense to permit the use of the ferry, but not strong enough to carry the weight of a man, but he succeeded in crossing with his mail sack by the use of two planks alternately thrown ahead on the thin ice to insure sufficient resistance:

There were compensations of course. The summer time with sheen of light and beauty. The fragrant woods vocal with song. The gorgeous color of the prairies with the wild free life of bird and beast, gave morning, noon and night an ever-changing thrill of sight and sound--on every hand were evidences of Nature's rich bounty: black lands with challenges to husbandry, full rivers pressing their wooded shores, and varigated fields of green and gold blending with the purple sky line. Prophesies of peace and plenty, now historic.

John H. Ryan

* was written in 1915